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ABSTRACT

This brief, which is part of a series of concept papers on educational partnerships, focuses on changes in leadership. The paper offers strategies for addressing turnover in key personnel in both existing and developing alliances and provides some suggestions for sustaining collaborative partnerships over time. It states that leadership transitions do not have to be disruptive, and that by bringing in a new member, planning ahead, and building a more sustainable alliance, partnerships can cope with a transition in leadership. The article suggests that leadership is not restricted to personnel at the top--it can be any person who plays a guiding, mobilizing role. When a key person leaves, successful alliances immediately acknowledge the void and begin to find ways to work through the transition. By expressing and resolving different viewpoints about the departure, partners can develop a clearer understanding of their vision. In addition to responding quickly, they should develop a strategy for identifying the next steps to take and then focus on reducing tensions created by the change. When a new leader is brought into the partnership, he or she should be provided the background of the partnership and be given time to become familiar with how the partnership works. (Contains 11 references.) (RJM)

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Improving Education through Research, Development and Service

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Managing Leadership Transitions in Education Partnerships

This brief is part of a series of concept papers on educational partnerships. It focuses on a critical aspect of collaborative relationships: changes in leadership personnel. Does the partnership fall apart when a leader leaves? How can partnerships minimize disruption and plan for smooth transitions?

Driven by the expressed need of the partnerships we work with, we turned to our own experiences with alliances and to the literature on successful interagency collaboration and educational change. We also called upon our R&D partners to learn more about how other agencies address this critical issue.

In this paper, we offer strategies for addressing turnover in key personnel in both existing and developing alliances and present approaches for sustaining collaborative partnerships over the long haul.

Introduction

Collaborative partnerships between school systems and education support providers offer promising approaches for educational change. Widely ranging in their focus and mission – from professional development to technology to urban school issues – these kinds of consortia have found that their partnerships have expanded their individual capabilities to address areas of mutual concern efficiently and comprehensively.

In partnerships, leaders play the unique and critical roles of building commitment and a shared vision, mobilizing resources, and guiding the work of the partnership for effective collaboration. The departure of such key individuals – whether due to retirement, career opportunities, relocation, economic changes, or even a mismatch in hiring – could have a major impact on the partnership.

Any group facing a transition could experience protracted voids in leadership, anxiety, and interruptions in its work. What are the best ways to respond? Are there strategies that partners can use to mitigate disruption and turmoil when one, or several, key individuals leave an alliance? How can developing partnerships set up structures ahead of time to make for smooth leadership transitions down the road? Are there opportunities for renewal hidden in the departure of a leader?

Leadership transitions do not have to be disruptive. With enough preparation and teamwork, alliances can weather the change and even become stronger. The strategies described in this brief have helped successful partnerships cope with a transition, bring in a new member, plan ahead, and build a more sustainable alliance. They are not intended as a step-by-step process that every partnership must follow and, indeed, should not be seen as a blueprint for success. Instead, they can be used as broad guidelines that will vary given the local context within which consortia work.

Box A

Networks, Alliances, Partnerships, and Consortia?

Interagency collaborative arrangements vary on a number of fronts, including the level of formality, types of activities, how deeply funds are combined, how decisions are made, and how information is shared. Leadership transitions are something all of these types of alliances will encounter.

For the purposes of this brief we use the words **network, alliance, partnership,** and **consortium** interchangeably to describe a range of formal and informal collaborations. Our intent is to identify strategies helpful to all of these kinds of groups in their own contexts.

For more information about the different types of collaborative inter-agency relationships, consult the WestEd Knowledge Brief: *What It Takes to Work Together: The Promise of Educational Partnerships* by BethAnn Berliner (1997).

Leaders in Partnerships

In collaborative partnerships, leaders come in various forms and styles depending upon the nature and context of the alliance and member agencies. Some leaders are appointed to their role and some assume that responsibility because of the position they hold within the agency. Others informally rise to the occasion when the opportunity presents itself.

Being a leader is not restricted to personnel at the top. A leader, in the broadest sense, is an individual at any level of an organization who plays a guiding, mobilizing role. Many times these responsibilities are shared by a number of people with leadership roles.

What leaders have in common are the roles and responsibilities that promote the functioning and success of the partnership. Leaders:

- build commitment and communicate the partnership's vision among all of the partners;
- mobilize resources, such as personnel, time, materials, and technical assistance, to ensure that the partnership and its members operate effectively and efficiently;
- facilitate communication and collaborative decisions through consensus building;
- provide links between the different cultures of member organizations;
- guide the work of the partnership, monitor their efforts to make sure they are on track with the partnership's vision, and facilitate re-evaluation when necessary;
- provide support, encouragement, and recognition for the collaborative efforts;
- handle problems and check to make sure that individual and agency needs are met; and,
- draw upon the expertise of others in design, implementation and institutionalization, including cultivating leadership and collaborative skills among partnership members.

When a leader leaves, one or several other partners will have to take on that person's responsibilities. In the next section of this brief, we offer strategies for partnerships experiencing transitions in leadership roles.

Coping With Leadership Turnover

Transitions in leadership are a common occurrence. In one of the most extensive evaluations of educational partnerships, over 50 percent had experienced turnover in key personnel within three years (Tushnet, et al., 1995).

Even so, when a leader announces that he or she is leaving, remaining partners often feel uncertain about how this might affect their work and the collaborative nature of the partnership. Those partnerships that survive leadership turnover, however, have "used transitions constructively in ways that cemented relationships and developed a clear understanding among participants" (Tushnet, et al., 1995). Strategies that partnerships have used to negotiate turnover include working together to acknowledge problems and find new leadership.

Collaborative Problem Solving

When a key person leaves, successful alliances immediately move to acknowledge the void and begin to find ways to work through the transition. Working out problems together can create tension. However, expressing and resolving different viewpoints about the departure and next steps can move the partnership forward in a larger sense. This can help develop a clearer and shared understanding about the group's vision and activities. Briefly, partners could focus their attention on the following immediate goals:

- responding quickly;
- developing a strategy that works for all members to identify next steps; and
- focusing on reducing tensions created by the change.

Maintaining momentum is key. During transitions, priorities and resources may shift, resulting in a change in individual and agency commitments and a loss of the partnership's vision. These things can be hard to reestablish. Remaining active and in the public eye can help partnerships survive the change. Further, maintaining the structure of the partnership and its traditional ways of operating is crucial. Many partnerships that we work with find that continuity in structure even when membership is changing can be very helpful. In the Northeast Nevada Technology Consortium, for example, immediate action to fill the vacant chair position on the consortium's governing committee helped the group weather two additional key staffing changes without creating added stress.

Drawing up a plan for the transition period will accomplish several objectives: bringing the group together in a focused way, and helping to answer urgent questions about managing the change. Who will take on this leader's responsibilities? How will they find a replacement? Will they transfer the responsibilities to other partnership members? Also important, in some cases, is understanding why the individual left.

Other members – from design teams, work groups, or governing boards – can assist in making transitions work smoothly by assuming responsibility for priority tasks. Current leaders can also help smooth the transition for their successor by helping to interview

candidates, documenting what they do on a day-to-day basis, training the successor, and serving as a consultant for the partnership after they leave.

In some cases, turnover in key staff takes place due to a mismatch in hiring. Successful alliances move quickly and deliberately to consider why this mistake was made, and incorporate this sometimes difficult inquiry into their collaborative problem solving. Did the job description not adequately reflect this person's job responsibilities? Was there a problem with the search process or interview protocol? Are there broader communication or interpersonal issues to be addressed? The partnership needs to be aware that there might be some resulting tension, anger or even blaming, which are best addressed together as a group.

Transitions are often charged with politics, communication breakdowns, and anxiety about the unknown. What is key is that alliance members work together during this stage, sharing information and ideas and taking advantage of the opportunity to bring in a new and effective leader.

Finding a Successor

If the partnership itself is hiring the departing leader's successor, it is wise to give all alliance members a voice in the selection process. A new leader is more likely to be accepted if everyone else feels they had a legitimate say in their selection and hiring. Helpful strategies to facilitate this process include:

- developing a collaborative hiring process;
- forming a selection committee; and,
- ensuring that partnership duties are incorporated into job description.

One strategy common to all interviewed partnerships was establishing a search and selection committee comprised of representatives from each partnering agency. The key factor in this process is the resulting discussions, and the opportunity they afford to achieve role clarity within the group. Understanding roles and responsibilities clearly enables partnerships to continue operating through periods of transition and even integrate duties of other partners into their scopes of work.

It is also helpful to include language about the successor's role in the partnership in the job description. By including a description of a successor's role and responsibilities in the partnership, candidates will have to at least address the partnership in their response to the job announcement. An examination of a candidate's responses to the importance of the partnership could help inform the search process. For example, one partnership developed job descriptions for everyone involved, including principals and college/university faculty. Dr. Lynn Rhodes of the Colorado Partnership for Educational Renewal added that, "By advertising up front the role they have in the partnership, we have been able to attract very talented and dedicated staff."

If the partnership is not doing the hiring, then influencing the process within the hiring agency can be important. Successful educational partnerships have used the following strategies:

- attending community meetings to increase dialogue and bring issues to the table;
- maintaining ties with the hiring partner organization;
- engaging in on-going dialogue with candidates; and,

- influencing job description language to be sure partnership duties are included.

In searching for a new superintendent, school districts typically hold community meetings in order to keep their community informed. Partnership members can use community meetings to raise questions about the role that the new superintendent will play in the alliance, which helps to keep issues concerning the alliance on the table and helps members gain access to the decision-making body.

Some alliances have had success influencing the selection of a successor by maintaining close ties to the search committees in each participating agency. Some even have their own representatives on the committees, ensuring that partnership goals are given voice during interviews and selection.

These ties can help gain access to candidates for the position. Established partnership members can also engage in discussions with candidates about the partnership, its history, current scope of work, and vision. During these conversations, they could raise the importance of the partnership endeavor making clear to the candidate that the partnership is highly valued in this system.

Bringing in New Partnership Leaders

Even with steps during selection like those mentioned above, new partnership leaders are not likely to have a high level of understanding of the partnership's history or vision. An orientation period can help provide background and context to acclimate the new member. In addition, partnerships vary in how they function (i.e., processes and procedures) and what their norms and social dynamics are. It may take some time for new leaders to become familiar with how the partnership works.

To build a sense of ownership and understanding and to avoid the cost of retraining new leaders, successful partnerships have established mentoring relationships between new and long-standing members. This helped "minimize the time it took for new members to become productive" (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

Documentation of the history and processes of the partnership is also particularly helpful to new partnership leaders. They learn more about why and how the partnership evolved and the type of work that the partnership has been involved in.

In Utah's Student Success Alliance, every new partnering school district's superintendent receives background information about the partnership, including the signed memorandum of understanding and press articles about the work of the partnership. This is accompanied by a series of meetings with long-standing partnership members to invite the new superintendent to continue their commitment to working with the alliance.

Bringing in a new leader and coping with a membership change are opportunities to strengthen and build the group's collaborative working relationship. In the next section we discuss ways partnerships can sustain the partnership as a whole and the work they are doing over the long haul, making them better able to weather transitions.

Sustaining an Alliance

Whether an alliance has a long and successful history or is just getting started, certain conditions and structures can help make it stronger and more enduring. It is rarely too early to engage in strategic planning and preparation for a change in key membership.

In fact, few elements can be as valuable to a partnership's effectiveness and survival as the strategies put in place to ensure smooth transitions. For many alliances, this work will be beneficial whether a transition ever occurs or not.

Focusing on the Vision

Strong alliances find the following strategies helpful in fostering momentum and collaboration:

- revisiting and renewing the partnership vision regularly;
- working toward increased focus and effectiveness of work; and
- conducting strategic planning.

Conducting an annual review of the partnership's mission and vision establishes a commitment among partnership members and helps to build shared ownership throughout all levels. Partnership members feel that the group's goals are their own, not those of someone else or another organization.

As part of this annual process, partnerships can conduct a progress assessment of their current scope of work. Doing this review together helps partners celebrate accomplishments, identify what needs to be done, make refinements, and develop future areas of work.

During regular or special meetings, partners can hold strategic planning sessions. Here, members can anticipate how future challenges might affect their collaborative relationship and incorporate possible solutions into their strategic plan. An important component of these conversations includes how partners will address leadership transitions. Involving representatives from multiple levels in each partnering agency brings diverse perspectives to the plan. Successful partnerships use these strategic planning sessions to focus not just the group's work, but also on its structure and how partners work together. The strategic plan is an important tool to sustain the alliance and its activities.

To learn more about strategies successful alliances use to sustain themselves over time, see box B on page 8.

Developing Sustainable Leadership

Partnership leaders play a critical role in preparing, supporting, and directing a partnership towards its shared vision for change. However, depending upon one person to play these roles can leave a partnership vulnerable, should that person leave. To minimize this risk, partners use the following strategies:

- distributing leadership at multiple levels;
- cultivating new leaders; and
- establishing clear roles and relationships.

In a partnership with distributed leadership, partners share decision-making responsibilities that affect the partnership's operations. Partners work together to reach agreement about the direction of the partnership and how to proceed. Through shared leadership, the partnership spreads ownership, organizational history, and knowledge

about what it takes to run a partnership. This way, the partnership does not depend upon one person for its survival.

Partnerships often have multiple levels of leadership and, to be effective, should recruit and involve individuals at different levels within each of the partnering agencies. For example, the partnership might have a governing board to oversee the operation of the partnership and task forces or design teams that design and carry out joint work. Leadership functions are then redundantly performed by teams of individuals at multiple levels within a system.

Partners should also continuously cultivate new leaders by teaching leadership skills to other members. Utah's Student Success Alliance, for example, has an internal focus on this kind of professional development and conducts workshops on the elements of strong leadership for its members.

New leaders can emerge as other needs surface within the group. In Phoenix, Arizona, the Western Maricopa Consortium has collaborated to develop reading assessments in English and Spanish for elementary grades. As a new need for mathematics assessments surfaced, other members in the consortium have taken on leadership roles.

Another strategy to spread leadership knowledge throughout an alliance is to rotate leadership. For example, CoPER alternates leaders between a school/district representative and a university/college representative as the partnership leader power is not associated with one particular type of institution. To smooth the transition from leader to leader, the partner next in line to take over leadership for the following year worked with the current leader. In essence, this partner was "in training" and functioned as a co-facilitator.

Conclusion

In the same way that alliances play a critical role in developing effective educational practice, partnership leaders play a critical role in directing alliances toward achieving their visions and goals. The departure of a visionary or key facilitator can rock an alliance's very foundation and challenge its effectiveness. Through the successful strategies identified above, partners can not only weather the challenges but seize the opportunity to assess and sharpen their focus as a group. This work will benefit not only the alliance itself but the community it serves.

Box B

Successful partnerships use a number of strategies to sustain themselves and remain effective over time. Here are some examples of things partners can do to maintain momentum, build long-term relationships and survive the departure of a visionary or key facilitator:

Governance:

- Develop interagency agreements, or memorandums of understanding, that detail

shared responsibility, resources, and authority. These documents formalize the way the alliance operates and the roles each member plays within the group

- Integrate the partnership's policies into member agencies' policy and procedure manuals

- Establish a system to continuously gather feedback about the impact of the partnership's activities. This information informs modifications and improvements to the alliance's activities, strategies, and goals.

Budgets and Resources:

- Include funds for partnership activities and operating structure in the budgets of each member agency. For example, a single line item budget could show the organization's contributions to the partnership's resources, operational expenses, and staffing.

- Balance the power of all member agencies, making sure each contributes resources according to its ability while preventing one agency from dominating by contributing considerably more than the others.

- Designate a fiscal agent, preferably one organization that can manage and organize resources for the partnership. Consider establishing a freestanding not-for-profit agency so that funding is not associated with one particular agency.

- Engage in continual search for external funding. Diversify funding sources and be cautious of over-dependency on external funding.

- Give forethought to ongoing costs (e.g., maintenance, administrative support, staffing, professional development for new and seasoned staff, materials, and evaluation) and how the partnership will meet those costs.

Personnel

- Include partnership duties and responsibilities in job descriptions when possible and incorporate these responsibilities into performance evaluations.

- Involve many people at different levels of member organizations.

- Provide on-going training and assistance for staff to meet the demands of their work; this includes technical support, resources and materials, and planning and release time.

Source: Adapted from Tushnet, et al., (1995). *Documentation and Evaluation of the Educational Partnerships Program: Final Report.* Los Alamitos: Southwest Regional Educational Laboratory

Box C

WestEd works with several State Alliance Projects committed to working collaboratively on enduring and high priority school improvement initiatives identified by and common to all members. In our work with these partnerships, WestEd plays the role of convener, facilitator, provider of technical assistance, and link to external resources. The following are some of our regional partnerships:

- *Student Success Alliance* located in northwestern Utah;
- *Northern Nevada Technology Consortium;*
- *Greater Phoenix Educational Management Consortium* located in Phoenix, Arizona;
- *Western Maricopa Consortium* located in Western Maricopa County in Arizona;
- *Arizona Tribal Coalition;* and
- *California Urban Superintendents Network.*

While the partnerships we work with vary significantly, we have observed common features, challenges, and tensions. As we continue our work with the State Alliance Projects, we will reflect on these commonalties through a series of forthcoming concept papers. As a whole, these papers will examine the role leaders play in building and sustaining the kind of long-term collaborative partnerships between school systems and their communities that lead to sustained and comprehensive approaches to reform that impacts classrooms and student learning.

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